

## Trotsky: The Prophet Debunked

Fifty years ago this month Leon Trotsky was assassinated by an agent of Stalin's secret police. We take this opportunity to critically assess his life and views. Trotsky was born Lev Davidovitch Bronstein, the son of moderately well-off peasant farmers in the southern Ukraine, in 1879. As a student at the University of Odessa he became an anti-Tsarist revolutionary. He soon fell foul of the authorities and was sentenced to prison and exile in Siberia from where he escaped in 1902 using the name of one of his jailers on his false identity card; this name Trotsky he was to use for the rest of his life.

Trotsky played a prominent part in the 1905 revolt that followed Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, being elected the Chairman of the St. Petersburg "soviet" ("soviet" is simply the Russian word for "council"). Oddly in view of his later political evolution, when the split occurred in the Russian Social Democratic movement in 1903 between the Mensheviks (orthodox Social Democrats like Kautsky in Germany) and the Bolsheviks (supporters of Lenin and his concept of a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries), Trotsky tended to favour the Mensheviks. Stalin and his supporters later took great pleasure in publishing one of Trotsky's writings from this period in which he violently criticised Lenin's conception of the party. Trotsky in fact tried to develop a middle position, evolving his own theory of how the anti-Tsarist revolution would develop.

Both the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks saw the anti-Tsarist revolution as being one that would lead to the establishment of a bourgeois Democratic Republic in Russia (the difference between them was that the Mensheviks tended to see this as being done by the liberal bourgeoisie while the Bolsheviks said it would have to be the work of the vanguard party). Trotsky took up a different position, arguing that if the working class were to come to power in the course of the coming bourgeois revolution in Russia it was unreasonable to expect them to hand over power to the bourgeoisie; they would, and should according to Trotsky, take steps to transform society in a socialist direction.

### Anti-Tsarist revolutionary

This theory, which Trotsky called "the theory of the permanent revolution", latching on to a phrase used by Marx in one of his articles on the abortive German bourgeois revolution of 1848-9, was absurd in that it implied that socialism could be on the agenda in economically backward Russia. It was however important historically as it was adopted by Lenin himself in April 1917 when he returned to Russia from exile in Switzerland. As a result Trotsky himself then rallied to the Bolsheviks.

In a very real sense Bolshevik ideology can be seen as a combination of Trotsky's theory of the revolution and Lenin's theory of the party. In 1932 Trotsky wrote a book called *The History of the Russian Revolution*, which is essential reading for anyone wanting to understand this event, not only because the author was an active participant in it but also because it unintentionally shows how this wasn't a working class socialist revolution but an anti-feudal revolution led by a vanguard party.

After the Bolshevik seizure of power Trotsky became, first, Commissar for Foreign Affairs and, then, Commander of the Red Army which successfully won the Civil War against the "White Guards" supported by the Western powers. This gave him an immense prestige both in Russia and among sympathisers with the Russian revolution in the rest of the world. His attitude on other issues during this period was even more anti-working class than that of Lenin who, on one occasion, was forced to intervene to attack as going too far Trotsky's proposal to "militarise" labour and the trade unions.

After Lenin's death Trotsky was gradually eased out of power. He was exiled first to Alma Ata in Russian central Asia and then to Turkey, Norway and finally Mexico. If he had stayed in Russia he would almost certainly have been tortured, tried and shot like Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and the

other original leaders of the Bolshevik Party. All the same he still ended up with a Stalinist ice-pick in his head.

### Degenerate Workers State

In exile Trotsky played the role of "loyal opposition" to the Stalin regime in Russia. He was very critical of the political aspects of this regime (at least some of them, since he too stood for a one-party dictatorship in Russia), but to his dying day defended the view that the Russian revolution had established a "Workers State" in Russia (whatever that might be) and that this represented a gain for the working class both of Russia and of the whole world.

His view that Russia under Stalin was a Workers State, not a perfect one, certainly, but a Workers State nevertheless, was set out in his book *The Revolution Betrayed* first published in 1936. This is the origin of the Trotskyist dogma that Russia is a "degenerate Workers State" in which a bureaucracy had usurped political power from the working class but without changing the social basis (nationalisation and planning).

This view is so absurd as to be hardly worth considering seriously: how could the adjective "workers" be applied to a regime where workers could be sent to a labour camp for turning up late for work and shot for going on strike? Trotsky was only able to sustain his point of view by making the completely unmarxist assumption that capitalist distribution relations (the privileges of the Stalinist bureaucracy) could exist on the basis of socialist production relations. Marx, by contrast, had concluded, from a study of past and present societies, that the mode of distribution was entirely determined by the mode of production. Thus the existence of privileged distribution relations in Russia should itself have been sufficient proof that Russia had nothing to do with socialism.

Trotsky rejected the view that Russia was state capitalist on the flimsiest of grounds: the absence of a private capitalist class, of private shareholders and bondholders who could inherit and bequeath their property. He failed to see that what made Russia capitalist was the existence there of wage-labour and capital accumulation not the nature and mode of recruitment of its ruling class.

Trotsky's view that Russia under Stalin was still some sort of "Workers State" was so absurd that it soon aroused criticism within the ranks of the Trotskyist movement itself which, since 1938, had been organised as the Fourth International. Two alternative views emerged. One was that Russia was neither capitalist nor a Workers State but some new kind of exploiting class society. The other was that Russia was state capitalist. The most easily accessible example of the first view is James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* and of the second Tony Cliff's *Russia: A Marxist Analysis*. Both books are well worth reading, though in fact neither Burnham nor Cliff could claim to be the originators of the theories they put forward. The majority of Trotskyists, however, remain committed to the dogma that Russia is a "degenerate Workers State".

### Transitional Demands

Trotskyist theory and practice is rather neatly summed up in the opening sentence of the manifesto the Fourth International adopted at its foundation in 1938. Called *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International*, and drafted by Trotsky himself, it began with the absurd declaration: "The world political situation is chiefly characterised by historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat". This tendency to reduce everything to a question of the right leadership (Trotsky once wrote a pamphlet on the Paris Commune in which he explained its failure by the absence of a Bolshevik Party there) reminds us that Trotskyists are 102 per cent Leninists and believers in the vanguard party. They believe, in other words, that workers by their own efforts are incapable of emancipating themselves and so must be led by an enlightened minority of professional revolutionaries (generally bourgeois intellectuals like Lenin and Trotsky). Thus they fall under the general criticism of Leninism and indeed of all theories which proclaim that workers need leaders.

The other important point in the manifesto of the Fourth International was the concept of "transitional demands". The manifesto contained a whole list of reform demands which was called "the transitional programme". This reform programme was said to be different from those of openly reformist parties like Labour in Britain and the Social Democratic parties on the Continent in that

Trotskyists claimed to be under no illusion that the reforms demanded could be achieved within the framework of capitalism. They were posed as bait by the vanguard party to get workers to struggle for them, on the theory that the workers would learn in the course of the struggle that these demands could not be achieved within capitalism and so would come to struggle (under the leadership of the vanguard party) to abolish capitalism.

Actually, most Trotskyists are not as cynical as they pretend to be here: in discussion with them you gain the clear impression that they share the illusion that the reforms they advocate can be achieved under capitalism (as, indeed, some of them could be). In other words, they are often the victims of their own "tactics".

### Splits and sects

After the Second World War, all the Trotskyists in Britain were united for a time in a single organisation, the Revolutionary Communist Party, which was affiliated to the Fourth International. All the leaders of the various Trotskyist sects (Gerry Healy, Ted Grant, Tony Cliff, etc.) were together in the RCP.

Most of the splits that subsequently occurred were over the attitude to adopt towards Russia and the Cold War. The group around Cliff, as we have already noted, took the view that Russia had been state capitalist since about 1928 (up till then it had supposedly been a "Workers State"). Logically they adopted the slogan "Neither Washington nor Moscow". Longtime known as the "International Socialists" they are now the Socialist Workers Party. Except on Russia they share all the other Trotskyist illusions (vanguard party, transitional demands, etc.).

In 1949 the RCP dissolved itself and most Trotskyists decided to join the Labour Party and "to bore from within". This tactic, known in Trotskyist parlance, as "entryism", is again based on the premise that the mass of the workers need leaders and are there to be manipulated. As would-be leaders of the working class, the argument goes, we must be where the workers are; as in Britain the Labour Party is "the mass party of the working class" this is where we Trotskyists must be if we are to have a chance of influencing (that is, manipulating) the workers.

After the general strike in France in May 1968, which seemed to show that student activists could influence the working class directly without needing to pass through "the mass party of the working class", most of the Trotskyist groups decided to abandon entryism and openly form their own parties. Thus parliamentary elections in Britain came to be enlivened by the presence of parties bearing such titles as "Workers Revolutionary Party", "Socialist Workers Party", "Revolutionary Communist Party", "Socialist Unity", etc. Needless to say, they got no more votes than we in the Socialist Party did.

This abandoning of entryism should not be interpreted as meaning opposition to the Labour Party, because nearly all the Trotskyist groups continue to support the election of a Labour government and to call on workers to vote Labour.

One Trotskyist sect, however, decided not to abandon the Labour Party after 1968 but to continue boring from within: the sect now known as the Militant Tendency (leader: Ted Grant). The absence of the other sects meant that they had a monopoly of this particular hunting ground. So when Labour turned left after 1979 they were there ready to recruit new members and increase their influence. In fact the Militant Tendency has undoubtedly been the most successful of all the Trotskyist groups that have ever infiltrated the Labour Party. They control a number of constituency parties as well as the Labour Party Young Socialists. There are even two or three Trotskyist MP's sitting on the Labour benches at Westminster.

From an ideological point of view, the Militant Tendency follows orthodox Trotskyism. Thus, for instance, they regard Russia as a "degenerate Workers State" which means they are more backward than many Labour Party members who willingly recognise that Russia is state capitalist.

Trotsky entirely identified capitalism with private capitalism and so concluded that society would cease to be capitalist once the private capitalist class had been expropriated. This meant that, in

contrast to Lenin who mistakenly saw state capitalism as a necessary step towards socialism, Trotsky committed the different mistake of seeing state capitalism as the negation of capitalism. Trotskyism, the movement he gave rise to, is a blend of Leninism and Reformism, committed on paper to replacing private capitalism with state capitalism through a violent insurrection led by a vanguard party, but in practice working to achieve state capitalism through reforms to be enacted by Labour governments.

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